

Human Forms in the Art of Melanesia

By PAUL S. WINGERT,
of the Faculty of Columbia University.*

Even a general familiarity with the art of mankind from his distant prehistoric beginnings to the present time reveals the common practice of expressing his ideas, emotions, and imaginings through the rendering of the human figure. This is equally true of the art of primitive peoples and that of the great civilizations. The reason for this is readily ascertainable. Since the subject matter of art is often the crystalization in form, line, and colour of the objective and subjective experiences of man with man, it is evident that the majority of these experiences can be recorded or expressed through the human form.

The sculptures carved for the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages, the painting and sculpture of Michelangelo, and the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt are classic examples of the importance of the human form in European art. But in no instance do these artists represent the human form scientifically. Instead, certain parts, such as the hands, the head, the bulk of the body, or its verticality, are emphasized. Although these distortions are often slight, and always subtle, they nevertheless exist; and from them this art achieves its greatness, aesthetically and expressively. Terror, contemplation, physical tension and relaxation, excitable imaginative moments, and devoutness can all be presented by the human form. In some instances, facial features are utilized almost exclusively (cf. the "Mona Lisa"), but in other cases the entire figure contributes to the desired expression.

Melanesian art differs from that of the great European masters particularly in the freedom with which the human figure is used. But this freedom is not a matter of personal choice by the artist; rather, the particular forms and patterns, as in the art of all primitive peoples, are largely determined by the cultural tradition of the regions of their origin. It is because the regions dominated by a cultural tradition are numerous in Melanesia, and often diverse in culture, that the art of these islands is so extremely varied in its character. This is particularly true in the different ways the human form is rendered. Although numerous similarities are apparent, the great diversity in this art must certainly be considered an outgrowth of the cultures of peoples who were divided into many small and often unrelated and hostile tribes.

It must be noted, however, that the domination of Melanesian art by tradition did not reduce the artist to the rôle of a mere technician. On the contrary, although he could not deviate very far from the art style of his tribe, these very restrictions relieved the artist of the necessity to invent or devise new forms. He was therefore free to devote his creative energies to the task of interpreting anew within an established tradition. That this did not lead to a dead level of mediocrity is amply

* This study was made by Dr. Wingert while he was working with the Auckland War Memorial Museum collections as the recipient of a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

evidenced by the many examples of Melanesian art in the Auckland War Memorial Museum. But all of these are not of equal quality. Some stand apart from others as true masterpieces, and make it clear that primitive artists, just as artists of every era and place, were of unequal artistic capabilities. The present concern is with a group of masterpieces of Melanesian sculpture.

Art may be considered the product of an extremely perceptive and receptive sensibility. That no two persons see the same thing when looking at an identical object is a truism. The artist, because of his sensitivity and training, is particularly observant of many of the details of life about him which pass unnoticed by other persons. From these details he selects the characteristic, the expressive, and presents them in his medium in such a way as to give a revealing interpretation to a common reality shared by everyone. The sculptor is particularly sensitive to the structure, proportions, postures, and movements of the human form. Through it he interprets and expresses all moments and aspects of life as he experiences them. The work he creates is therefore a personal document, and through it he shares his experiences with others, whose experiences he in turn enriches. It is his perceptivity to life forms which enables the Melanesian artist to infuse traditional patterns with a personal and sensitive interpretation.

Unlike many European artists of the past and present, the Melanesian sculptor does not work with the human form, nor with examples of his tribal forms before him as models. He has been so sufficiently trained in the latter that his visual memory of them is complete; and he has been so observant of his fellow men that he has in his mind a personal synthesis of these observations. It is for this reason that the human form, although the natural aspects of it are substantially retained in the art of various regions of Melanesia, is not rendered in a scientifically descriptive manner. Rather, its particular character is presented by simplified but vigorous sculptural forms which express the component parts of the body and their integration. This may be called a "naturalistic" rendering.

Sculptures of this type are not, however, common in Melanesia. They appear, in fact, as characteristic forms in only two areas—the western Solomon Islands and the Admiralty Islands. In both of these areas, moreover, the human figure is also rendered in a number of other different ways. In the Solomon Islands sculptures of the naturalistic style have compact proportions and heavy, full-volumed forms (Pl. 29). Each part—arms, legs, body, neck, and head—is given as a distinct entity; and in this way the structural components of the human form are forcefully expressed. This is made even more emphatic by a slight emphasis of the points of articulation, that is the joints, which serve the dual role of separating the parts and of connecting them.

In his rendering of each part, the Solomon Island sculptor gives a simplified synthesis of its basic character, its roundness, shape, and weight. Descriptive modelling or expository details, such as muscles, would weaken the force of his statement. He has succeeded, moreover, in giving a remarkable vitality to his figure through the way all of the parts work organically together and by the slight flexion or relaxation given to the various joints. Since it is not a personalized figure, the facial features are not individualized.

This small figure is an excellent example of a purely sculptural expression. Its aesthetic quality derives from its rhythmic organization of heavy volumes in space; its smooth surfaces, which allow an uninterrupted flow of soft light over the forms; and its concentration on and slight emphasis of essentials of parts. In it the sculptor discloses his knowledge of the human form, and by it he adds to the knowledge of others. That this was the style of a Solomon Island area and not that of an individual is demonstrated by other examples with the same provenience (Fig. 1).

In contrast, the Admiralty Island artist in his rendering ignores the roundness of component parts and the significance of their assemblage and, instead, expresses the verticality of the figure as a whole without stressing its individual parts (Pl. 30, Fig. 1). The pose is given a frozen, eternal quality, with not the least suggestion of movement or elasticity. A strict bilateral symmetry adds to this expression of stiffness. The body parts are attenuated and of tight, slightly squarish columnar shapes. Only the spheroidal head is a pure geometric shape. And yet, the quiet upward movement of steady line and the compact unity of slight forms in space express in subtle manner the thoughtful, introspective aspect of man's nature. While the details of Admiralty Island style vary considerably (Fig. 2), the more naturalistic carvings all have this quality of expression.

In these examples of Admiralty and Solomon Islands sculpture certain characteristics are stressed over others; but a moderate degree of distortion of the human form is also typical of Melanesian art. This treatment has, in fact, a wider distribution than the naturalistic rendering. For expressive reasons it is utilized in many different ways, although it is particularly apparent in the enlargement of the head and in the elongation or compression of different parts of the body.

An excellent example of this style is seen in an elongated female figure from the Solomon Islands (Pl. 30, Fig. 2). This interpretation of human form is further removed from nature than that in the naturalistic styles. The forms of the body and head are now slightly distorted to agree with geometric shapes. While the shapes are separated or marked off so as to reveal with a minimum of description their fundamental geometric character, they are also unified by a strong linear pattern into a system of sculptural relationships, which, in turn, are expressive of those of the human body. A similar treatment is likewise evident in the slightly enlarged shaping of the head and in the interpretation of facial features. Another particularly good example of this style appears in a small figure carved on the handle of a wooden knife from the Banks Islands (Fig. 3).



FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.

With few exceptions, a single style of sculpture prevails in each primitive tribe or area.* The style is not only found in ceremonial objects of great importance, but also in the decorative carving on utilitarian objects, whether or not these were intended for ceremonial use. A unity of style is therefore recognizable within an area. For example, the head so magnificently carved on the handle of a New Hebrides adze



FIG. 3.

(Pl. 31, Fig. 1) conforms to the style of sculpture prevailing in a particular part of these Islands. It, too, is rendered in a moderately distorted manner. By pointing the top of the head to agree with a pointed chin a basically diamond shape is achieved. An inversion of natural form is adopted by giving this shape a vertical concavity of surface. Only the rounded plane of the forehead adheres to nature. The huge nose is an exaggeration of the large, fleshy Melanesian nose; while the pierced septum is based on the actual custom, so widespread in Melanesia, of piercing the septum, through which an ornament of some sort was worn. The eyes are very large, sharp, protruding ovoid forms and the mouth a rather restrained simple crescent. Of considerable importance is the flattening out of the facial planes, since by this expedient the eyes and the nose are given added expressive and sculptural force. And yet this head is only moderately distorted, and is clearly derived from natural form.

An examination of any comprehensive collection of Melanesian art discloses that in by far the greater number of examples distortion of the human form is carried to extremes. In this kind of sculpture the parts of the body and the overall appearance of the human form are frequently far removed from reality. The distortions were generally motivated by the necessity to express a non-physical being, such as a spirit or a supernatural force. These were experienced by certain persons in moments of hysteria or great psychological tension, when their tangible appearance was revealed. The appearance of the being was thereafter established. But it is important to note that the world of normal experience was a strong factor in these moments of abnormal experience, since the distortions are those of familiar normal forms. This group of styles can certainly be considered dominated by expressive desires. Aesthetic principles and elements were, on the other hand, constantly employed to enhance the expressive power of a work, especially when the sculptor was a great artist.

The distribution of these greatly distorted styles covered almost all of the Melanesian islands. It was particularly marked in certain regions of the Solomon Islands, in New Guinea, New Britain, and in New Ireland. A small canoe prow figure from the central Solomons is a superb example (Pl. 31, Fig. 2). The carving expresses a powerful spirit which protected the occupants of headhunting canoes during their grisly expeditions. Characteristic of these figures, the head, its shape and size, and the facial features, are gross distortions; while the

* "Style" may be said to consist of the system of proportions, the interpretation and shaping of parts, the rendering of descriptive or decorative detail, and the use of colour which are adhered to consistently within an area or by a group.

remainder of the carving consists of a pair of arms, with no body but free space between them, and hands clasped under the chin, the hands in some examples represented as holding a small human head. The expression of these sculptural shapes is of dramatic intensity. The tapering elongation of the cranium and the powerful forward thrust of the facial area contribute greatly to this effect. Although the facial forms, which consist of distorted lower and upper jaws, nose, mouth, and teeth, have an animalistic appearance, an examination of a number of these carvings shows that they are merely exaggerations of the prognathism, fleshy noses, and full-lipped mouths of the Solomon Islanders. In this and many other objects from these Islands a very careful shell inlay is used on the black surfaces to define further structural parts and details.

Human figure distortions are in some Melanesian sculpture combined with non-human forms. Many examples from the Sepik River area of New Guinea have heads with bird features attached to a distorted human body (Fig. 4). These were made for use in ancestor rites or as containers of ancestor spirit power, the concept being that at death the spirit departed as a bird, hence the combined representation of the spirit and physical aspects of an ancestor. But the bird features are also distorted, so that the resulting figure is both related to and unlike reality. It is rather a tangible and aesthetically exciting sculptural expression of a concept.



FIG. 4.

From the extreme south-eastern part of New Guinea another style within this group is represented by a small squatting figure carved as the handle of a lime spatula* (Pl. 32). This carving, too, has a large animal-like head; but a wooden comb carved as projecting above the back of the head establishes it clearly as a distorted human figure. These distortions have decorative as well as expressive intent. The expression is that of a squatting figure holding his knees in his hands in the pose of balancing on the small platform at the base of the blade. The arms and legs, as slender curvilinear projections from the body, are interlocked in a rhythmic pattern which conveys the balance and tension of the pose. The enlargement of the head serves the practical function of a knob or firm hand-grip at the top of the handle; but in the ovoid shape of the head are presented the curves so effectively developed in the forms below. Even the flattened planes of the face follow the curvature of the surface of the head. The design of this little carving is a masterpiece of rhythmic relationships.

In still another example from New Guinea, from the Huon Gulf area on the north east coast, human figures are used in a distorted manner as supports for a neck-rest (Fig. 5). This style, in common with those from various other parts of Melanesia, consists of non-naturalistic

* Spatulas such as this were used in the betel-nut chewing habit to transfer lime from a container to the mouth.

figures composed of a unique assemblage of freely interpreted parts of the human form. It suggests that there was initially a dismemberment of the human body.



FIG. 5.

The parts were then geometrically re-shaped and were re-combined in a new order so as to effect a sculptural expression of the dynamic forces of the human figure. In the Huon Gulf sculptures, the body is a heavy trapezoidal block; the stiff, piston-like arms at the sides emphasize the vigorous downward thrust of this block; the legs are curving, flexible forms, resembling the springy, curved legs of a tubular metal chair, and are well capable expressively of supporting this thrust, while the head, shaped as a very high relief form on the surface of the upper part of the body (the neck has been discarded), exerts an even greater downward thrust parallel to that of the body. There is a powerful compression in these small carvings and an adroit balancing and counterpoising of thrusting forces. In their analysis of the dynamics of the human figure, they show an amazing perception of reality; but their component

parts are pure sculptural devices for the realization of this expression.

The step beyond the Huon Gulf style is the creation of geometric or abstract equivalents for the various parts of the human figure. In a few regions in Melanesia, such a scheme or pattern, often approaching pure geometrization, is used to indicate the human form or the human head. This is strikingly evident in a group of wooden knives from the Banks Islands (Fig. 6 and cf. Fig 3), where the body parts are presented as geometric shapes arranged in an open pattern. Some designs, however, especially those from the Papuan Gulf area on the south coast of New Guinea, represent a schematic transcription on a two-dimensional surface of three-dimensional forms (Pl. 33). When flattened out a rounded form such as the forehead here becomes a wide crescent, and an open mouth a deep V-shape. It is as though a frontal view of a form were bisected and the two halves juxtaposed on a flat surface. These Papuan Gulf patterns, often restricted to the human head or face, are rendered in wide lines or bands usually cut in low relief, and are combined at times with purely geometric elements (Fig. 7). The various parts of the design are further defined by the extensive use of colour, the pigments being white, black, and various shades of red. Many of these designs approach an abstract interpretation of life forms. Such near-abstractions occur in other parts of Melanesia, particularly in New Britain, New Ireland, and the Sepik River area of New Guinea.



FIG. 6.

The human form is rendered with very great variety in the sculpture of Melanesia. This often spectacular and always aesthetically arresting art demonstrates conclusively that the expressive possibilities through the use of the human form are almost limitless. It also reveals that masterpieces will result in any art, regardless of tradition and motivation, since capability, perception, and sensitivity are shared in common by great artists of all times and places.



FIG. 7.



Standing figure in hard, close-grained wood. 19½ inches high. Solomon Islands.



Fig. 1. Ancestor figure. 52 inches high. Admiralty Islands.
Fig. 2. Female figure. 26 inches high. Solomon Islands.



Fig. 1. Adze decorated with carved head. 20 inches long. New Hebrides.
Fig. 2. Canoe ornament with shell inlay. 11 inches high. Solomon Islands.



Handle of lime spatula. 10 inches long. Massim area, S.E. New Guinea.



Shield from the Gulf of Papua. 30 inches high.